

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

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AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
USINT BAGHDAD
USMISSION USUN NY
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 7383

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT)

FOR SECRETARY FROM MURPHY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, IS, SY, EG, US, XF
SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST NEGOTIATIONS

REF: STATE 281964 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: SYRIA'S POSITION VIS-A-VIS THE PEACE PROCESS
REMAINS FLUID. IT IS ATTEMPTING ASSERT LEADERSHIP ROLE
OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE SADAT'S INITIATIVE BUT IS MINDFUL THAT
TOO MUCH PRESSURE COULD PUSH SADAT INTO SEPARATE PEACE.
ASSAD MAY NOW BE INCLINED TO PLAY DOWN HIS FORMER
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PROCEDURAL REQUIREMENTS FOR CONVENING GENEVA. SYRIAN
PUBLIC OPINION IS MIXED; WHILE BULK OF POPULATION SEEMS
SUPPORTIVE OF SADAT, CERTAIN KEY CONSTITUENCIES OF THE
SYRIAN PRESIDENT REMAIN OUTRAGED AT EGYPTIAN INITIATIVES.
WHATEVER THEIR DIFFERENCES, SYRIANS AGREE THAT ISRAELI
OBJECTIVES ARE TERRITORIAL EXPANSION AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC
DOMINATION. ASSAD FACES A HIGHLY COMPLEX SERIES OF

CHALLENGES TO MAINTAIN HIS OWN CONTROL AND DEFEND SYRIAN INTERESTS AS HE AND HIS KEY SUPPORTERS PERCEIVE THEM IT IS IMPORTANT NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS AT CAIRO THAT US STAY IN CLOSEST POSSIBLE CONTACT WITH ASSAD, ASSURING HIM WE WISH TO CONTINUE TO WORK WITH HIM TO OBTAIN AN OVERALL SETTLEMENT IN THE GENEVA CONTEXT. I RECOMMEND A THERTON VISIT TO DAMASCUS IN CONNECTION WITH HIS ATTENDANCE AT CAIRO CONFERENCE. END SUMMARY

1. ASSAD IS ESTRANGED FROM THE CURRENT COURSE OF THE PEACE PROCESS. THE QUESTION WE MUST ASK IS WHAT WE CAN DO, IF ANYTHING, TO BRING SYRIA BACK INTO THE PROCESS OR AT THE VERY LEAST HALT ITS DRIFT TOWARD OBSTRUCTIONISM. IF NEITHER OF THESE OBJECTIVES PROVES POSSIBLE, WE MUST LOOK TO THE LESSER OBJECTIVES OF PREVENTING SYRIA FROM DERAILING EGYPTIAN/ISRAELI NEGOTIATIONS AND PROTECTING OUR OWN POSITION IN A MORE RADICALIZED SYRIAN STATE.

2. THE SITUATION IN SYRIA VIS-A-VIS THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS IS STILL FLUID. ASSAD VIEWS SADAT'S MOVES AS HAVING SACRIFICED MUCH FOR NO PRACTICAL GAIN. THOUGH HE WAS SHAKEN BY SADAT'S INITIATIVE AND SUBSEQUENT PACE OF EVENTS, ASSAD IS REGAINING HIS BALANCE AND BEGINNING TO DEVELOP A DIPLOMATIC POSTURE TO COPE WITH THE SITUATION. HE IS MANEUVERING TO BRING MAXIMUM PRESSURE ON SADAT TO ABANDON HIS INITIATIVES, WHILE KEEPING AJAR SECRET

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THE DOOR OF RECONCILIATION. IT IS MOOT QUESTION WHETHER ASSAD REALLY EXPECTS SADAT TO ABANDON HIS PRESENT COURSE BUT WE RECALL HOW LONG HE PERSISTED IN SIMILAR EFFORT POST-SINAI II. ASSAD IS PROCLAIMING SYRIA'S ADHERENCE TO THE HIGHROAD OF ARAB SOLIDARITY (AFFIRMING DAMASCUS IS ITS LEADER), SUPPORT FOR THE PLO, AND SYRIAN DESIRE FOR A JUST PEACE BASED ON FULL WITHDRAWAL AND PALESTINIAN RIGHTS.

3. ASSAD APPEARS MINDFUL THAT TOO MUCH PRESSURE COULD PUSH SADAT, OUT OF FRUSTRATION AND EGYPTIAN NATIONALISM, INTO A SEPARATE PEACE WITH ISRAEL. CONCOMITANTLY, HE IS AWARE THAT THE PRICE DEMANDED BY COUNTRIES LIKE LIBYA AND IRAQ FOR RALLYING TO SYRIAN LEADERSHIP MAY BE UNACCEPTABLE IN TERMS OF DAMAGE TO HIS RELATIONS BOTH WITH THE SAUDIS AND OURSELVES. HIS IMMEDIATE TASK OF MAPPING HIS WAY THROUGH THE NEW DIPLOMATIC MINE-FIELD IS ENORMOUSLY DIFFICULT. IRONICALLY, BECAUSE OF SADAT'S UNILATERAL APPROACH TO ISRAEL, THE IDEA OF A COMPREHENSIVE GENEVA CONFERENCE HAS NEVER LOOKED SO APPEALING TO DAMASCUS AS IT DOES AT THIS MOMENT. SYRIA MAY NOW BE INCLINED TO GIVE LESS WEIGHT TO ITS PROCEDURAL REQUIREMENTS FOR CONVENING GENEVA THAN IT HAD GIVEN

THEM PRIOR TO THE JERUSALEM VISIT.

4. SADAT'S INITIATIVES SHOCKED THE LEADERSHIP AND TO SOME DEGREE HUMILIATED ASSAD, WHO AS A GOOD SYRIAN IS UNWILLING TO ADMIT HE SHOULD FOLLOW AN EGYPTIAN LEAD. HE HAS ORCHESTRATED A CAMPAIGN DESIGNED TO INSURE HIS HOLD ON POWER, TO ADVANCE SYRIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS AND TO CATER TO THE PERCEPTIONS OF HIS PRINCIPAL CONSTITUENCIES. OUR LIMITED SAMPLING OF SYRIAN REACTION TO SADAT'S INIATIVES HAS ELICITED PREDICTABLY MIXED RESPONSES. SYRIANS BY AND LARGE APPEAR TO WISH SADAT WELL AND HOPE HE WILL GET SUBSTANTIAL CONCESSIONS FROM THE ISRAELIS, BUT THEY DOUBT HE WILL BE SUCCESSFUL. THE SYRIANS, ALONG WITH OTHER ARABS, ARE WARWEARY AND HAVE REACTED TO THE REGIME'S
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EFFORTS TO WHIP UP PUBLIC SENTIMENTS AGAINST SADAT'S "TREASON" WITH EITHER APATHY OR CYNICISM. WE HAVE HEARD FROM SEVERAL SOURCES FOR EXAMPLE THAT DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY IS OPERATING NORMALLY. THERE IS NO GROUNDSWELL OF STUDENT OUTRAGE. PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS HAVE BEEN LIMITED IN SCOPE AND OBVIOUSLY ENGINEERED BY PARTY AND POLICE OFFICIALS. THE ARMY ALSO, ACCORDING TO OUR SOURCES, IS RESERVING JUDGMENT ON SADAT'S MOVES. MANY WOULD LIKE TO SEE HIM SUCCEED. ON THE OTHER HAND, MANY BAATHI REGULARS, COMMUNISTS AND NASSERITES AS WELL AS THE MORE FANATICAL ANTI-ALAWITE SUNNI ARE OUTRAGED AT SADAT AND DEMAND HIS HEAD. WHAT ASSAD, THE PARTY AND THE SYRIAN PEOPLE IN GENERAL SEEM TO AGREE ON IS THEIR CONVICTION THAT ISRAEL'S OBJECTIVES ARE TERRITORIAL EXPANSION AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC DOMINATION.

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

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FOR SECRETARY FROM MURPHY

5. ASSAD ENCOURAGED, IN OUR OPINION, THE BAATH PARTY LEADERSHIP TO GIVE VENT TO ITS REACTION TO SADAT'S INVITATIVE IN ORDER TO ENHANCE THE IMPRESSION OF NATIONAL SOLIDARITY. HE ORCHESTRATED A PARTY/GOVERNMENT COMMUNIQUE STRONGLY CRITICAL OF SADAT THE NIGHT THE EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT LEFT DAMASCUS, TWO DAYS BEFORE THE JERUSALEM VISIT. THE PARTY-CONTROLLED PRESS HAS SINCE SHRILLY ELABORATED ON THAT FIRST DAY'S CRITICISM OF SADAT. THESE ATTACKS HAVE FRAMED A COUNTERPOINT TO ASSAD'S OWN MORE MODERATE STATEMENTS. THE PRESIDENT PROBABLY SEES VALUE IN HAVING BOTH APPROACHES COUNTINUE FOR THE MOMENT, IN ANY EVENT IT WILL TAKE SOME TIME TO RUN OFF THE MEDIA ATTACKS, WHEN AND IF HE JUDGES IT DESIRABLE TO DO SO.

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6. OVER THE PAST YEARS, ASSAD HAS BUILT HIS OWN STRATEGY VIS-A-VIS ISREAL ON THREE MAIN ASSUMPTIONS: 1) ARABS HAVE NO REALISTIC PROSPECT OF MILITARILY DEFEATING ISRAEL,

2) WOULD PUBLIC OPINION CAN ISOLATE ISREAEL AND CONCURAGE THE UNITED STATES -- THE ONLY COUNTRY WHICH CAN DO SO -- TO COMPEL ISRAELI POLITICAL CONCESSIONS, AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, 3) ARAB UNITY AND ARAB ECONOMIC LEVERAGE ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS IN MANIPULATING WORLD OPINION AND AMERICAN POLICY.

7. SADAT, IF HE PROVES SUCCESSFUL AT THE CAIRO CONFERENCE AND BEYOND, HAS UNDERCUT ASSAD'S STRATEGY. THE JERUSALEM VISIT AND CONTINUING EGYPTIAN/ISRAELI BILATERAL CONTACTS HAVE THREATENED IN HIS EYES TO REDUCE THE US MEDIATION ROLE. SADAT'S OPENING OF LIMITED BILATERAL TIES HAS WEAKENED THE CASE IN THE THIRD WORLD AND EUROPE FOR ISOLATING ISRAEL AND HAS FUTHER DAM-

AGED THE PROSPECT OF ENHANCED ARAB UNITY TO CONFRONT JERUSALEM. SADAT'S OPENING TO ISRAEL HAS BELITTLED THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS WHICH ASSAD WAS SEEKING TO GET INCORPORATED INTO THE US WORKING PAPER.

8. ASSAD IS GAMBLING ON THE FACT THAT HE IS RIGHT AND SADAT IS WRONG. ASSAD'S SHORT TERM POLICY OF RESISTANCE TO SADAT IS PERDICATED ON THE JUDGMENT THAT SADAT WILL FAIL TO GET SUFFICIENT CONCESSIONS FROM THE ISRAELIS TO JUSTIFY HIS ACTIONS EVEN TO THE MODERATE ARABS. ASSAD IS COUNTING ON BEING ABLE TO PICK UP THE PIECES.

9. IF SADAT FAILS WE WILL LIKELY SEE A STRENGTHENED ASSAD, FEELING JUSTIFIED IN HIS STRATEGY AND HAVING PROVED TO SADAT THE ERROR OF HIS WAYS. IN SUCH EVENT, ASSAD WILL CONTINUE TO
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SPEAK OF A JUST PEACE BUT WILL FEEL HIS DISTRUST OF THE ISRAELIS TO BE MORE JUSTIFIED THEN EVER. IT IS DIFFICULT FOR US TO SEE HOW A SUCCESSFUL GENEVA COULD FOLLOW EARLY ON SADAT'S FAILURE.

10. IF SADAT SUCCEEDS, ON THE OTHER HAND, THE DEGREE TO WHICH HE DOES SO COULD ALSO INCREASE ASSAD'S PROBLEMS IN MOVING TO GENEVA, PARTICULARLY IF HE PERCEIVES THIS TO BE AT HIS EXPENSE. ASSAD TOLD THE FRENCH HE IS NOT GOING TO TURN REJECTIONIST. HIS ACHIEVEMENT OF SOVIET SUPPORT, THROUGH KHADDAM'S LATEST MOSCOW VISIT, MOMENTARILY RELIEVES HIM OF HAVING TO FURTHER COURT IRQ AND HIS OWN DOMESTIC HARDLINERS. THUS, DESPITE PREDICTABLE HARD LINE POSTURING, WE BELIEVE ASSAD WILL SEE HIS OPTIONS ARE REALISTICALLY LIMITED TO CONTINUE FENCE STRADDLING OR SOMEHOW REJOINING THE NEGOTIATIONS. HIS DECISION WILL TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHAT THE ISRAELIS MAY HAVE GIVEN SADAT WHICH WOULD ALSO MEET ASSAD'S NEEDS, OR WHAT THEY HAVE SIGNALLED THEY WILL CONSIDER GIVING SADAT AND THE OTHER ARABS. TO SOME DEGREE HIS COURSE OF ACTION WILL ALSO BE AFFECTED BY HIS JUDGEMENT OF HOW MUCH PERSONAL HUMILIATION WILL BE INVOLVED BY HIS JOINING SADAT'S BANDWAGON.

11. HAVING PREDICATED HIS FORMER STRATEGY IN PART ON THE ROLE THE US MUST PLAY, A FAVORABLY SYRIAN DECISION ON GENEVA WILL BE EASIER FOR ASSAD IF THE US IS SEEN AS READY TO CONTINUE ITS CENTRAL ROLE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS AND IF SOMETHING DEVELOPS IN THE CAIRO CONFERENCE WHICH ASSAD CAN PORTRAY AS AN ISRAELI CONCESSION. ASSAD, WE BELIEVE, EXPECTS US TO ACTIVELY GUIDE THE CAIRO NEGOTIATING PROCESS AND, WHATEVER WE IN FACT MAY DO, HE WILL SEE OUR HAND IN WHATEVER HAPPENS IN CAIRO.

12. AS FAR AS OUR APPROACH TO SYRIA GOES, WE SHOULD IMPRESS UPON THE SYRIANS THAT THE US CONTINUES TO DESIRE AN OVERALL

SETTLEMENT IN THE GENEVA CONTEXT AND THAT WE CONTINUE TO WANT
TO WORK WITH SYRIA'S LEADERSHIP TO ATTAIN IT. THIS WILL ENCOURAGE
ASSAD'S POSITIVE INCLINATION TOWARDS GENEVA AS THE ALTERNATIVE
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TO BILATERAL FRAGMENTATION.

13. I URGE CONSIDERATION BE GIVEN TO ROY ATHERTON TO COME
TO DAMASCUS AFTER OR DURING CAIRO MEETINGS TO PROVIDE THE
SYRIANS WITH AN IMMEDIATE READOUT AND TO REITERATE THE US
APPROACH TOWARDS NEGOTIATIONS. IF DEPARTMENT AGREES TO THIS, I
SHOULD BE INSTRUCTED BEFORE CAIRO CONVENES TO ADVISE ASSAD
OF OUR POSTURE AND OF ATHERTON'S INTENTION TO VISIT.
MURPHY

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